

**Title**

Food poverty and informal network support in a changing Portuguese rural area

**Abstract**

Different representations of the “countryside” coexist in contemporary Portugal, from idyllic depictions to portrayals of emptiness and loneliness. Rural contexts close to urban areas are assumed to have informal support networks that can alleviate poverty and exclusion when institutional support fails. The incidence and intensity of food poverty are presumed to be lessened by proximity to food production sites and land ownership. In this paper, we aim to analyse how living in an intermediate area shapes the experience of food poverty. We draw on qualitative case studies of low-income families living in between a predominantly rural and a predominantly urban territory in Portugal, which has been through a process of restructuring of its rural territory since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Paying attention to the specificities of this intermediate context, including the availability of formal support, we will investigate to what extent informal support networks alleviate food poverty for these families. Our discussion adds to the scientific debate on food poverty and its links to social networks in intermediate areas previously embedded in predominantly rural territories. We also discuss the highly gendered nature of informal support and its significance for women enduring food poverty.

**Keywords**

Food Poverty; Rurality and Intermediate areas; Families; Social Networks; Welfare; Portugal

## Introduction

In a context of rising food insecurity across Europe (Davis & Geiger 2017, Loopstra *et al.* 2015), the concept of food poverty emerged as a tool to understand relationality and the multiple deprivations created by the interplay between social, political, and cultural dynamics (Caraher & Dowler 2014, O'Connor *et al.* 2016). However, while there is a burgeoning literature on rural studies and poverty (May *et al.* 2020, Shucksmith 2012, Shucksmith & Schafft 2012), research on experiences of food poverty in rural or intermediate areas in Europe remains scarce. Such is at odds with poverty rates being higher in rural areas across Europe and also in Portugal (Augère-Granier 2017). Some argue that the constraints of living in a rural area are offset by the proximity to food production sites and access to “foods packed with natural goodness” (Bell 2006). Representations of rurality, family, and communitarianism coalesce into nostalgia and notions of the rural idyll. A common trope conflates rural lifestyles with access to more extensive informal support networks. Following this reasoning, living in rural areas would offer a remedy for poverty because of communitarianism and closeness to food production sites.

We consider that these assumptions merit scrutiny against lived experiences in non-urban areas. In this paper, we examine how experiences of food poverty are locally constructed and what is the role played by social support, drawing on research conducted on the outskirts of the Greater Lisbon Area. Our study site can be considered an intermediate area within the European Union’s urban-rural typology<sup>1</sup>. This research was guided by the following research questions: “How does living in an intermediate area shape the experience of being food poor?”, “What sources of social support can individuals draw from and what role, if any, they play in alleviating food poverty?”, “How is food shared within informal social networks and what is their gendered patterns?”.

The article is structured as follows. In the first section, we discuss discourses and representations of the rural and their lasting influence on understandings of food in contemporary rural spaces. We then focus on Portugal, drawing attention to how notions of communitarianism and informal social networks intersect with the provision of welfare. In the third section, we present our research context, a former predominantly rural territory undergoing a process of urbanisation in the outskirts of Lisbon, followed by a description of the methods and materials used in the research. In the fourth section, we present three case studies. We conclude with a discussion that reflects on the experiences of food poverty, the role and gendered patterns of informal networks in a changing rural parish council within a metropolitan area.

### **Rurality and community: a powerful trope**

When thinking about the countryside or the city, sharp images inevitably come to mind: they are “myths functioning as memory” (Williams 1975). In his analysis of English literature, Williams concluded that the countryside is often associated with positive ideas, such as those of community and wholesomeness, even if notions of ignorance and backwardness also permeate discourses on rurality (Sobral 2014, Williams 1975). Conversely, the city is the epitome of progress and development, even if also connoted with worldliness and unbridled ambition. Usage of the wide range of connotations “depend (...) upon the historical moments of their (re)production and the orientations of those who reproduce them” (Domingos *et al.* 2014).

Far from metaphysical entities or deep-rooted psychological archetypes, representations of the countryside stem from the underlying social and economic processes that have been shaping them for centuries, all related to the development of capitalism. At different junctures, the spectrum of representations coalesce into unique *structures of feeling*, i.e. “meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt” or “thought as felt and feeling

as thought” (Williams 1975). These ideas associated are historically unstable and vulnerable to change. Therefore, social classes have a complex and changeable relationship with these structures of feeling. Analysis of the evolution of these meanings informs us of the power dynamics in a given social context, the hegemonic pressures, resistance, and limits to social forces struggling to define them (Domingos *et al.* 2014).

While the origins of pastoral utopias have received critical reappraisal and scrutiny (Bell 2006, Bunce 2005, Halfacree 1995), associations between rurality, communitarianism, feelings of togetherness, shared bonds still influence contemporary imaginaries. The rural idyll lingers as a powerful representation of the countryside (Mingay 1989), even in the face of far-reaching transformations that agricultural production and rural areas have experienced, Pastoralist depictions of the rural thrive in literature, cinema, media and tourism promotion (Bell 2006, Halfacree 2007, Perkins 2006). While contours may change, the appeal of community, comfort and peace persists, from the *tourist-idyll* to the *gastro-idyl* (Bell 2006).

The perpetuation of the rural idyll trope may ensue from romanticized views of urban dwellers and middle-class groups that project on the ‘rural’ their hopes of a better life, less hectic, less polluted, quieter, healthier, and more authentic (Halfacree 2007, Newby 1980). Short (2006) maintains that these notions blossom in periods of crisis, especially when urban life is questioned. Rural spaces are often depicted as cocoons that protect from the vagaries of modern life, and for some, from the hardship impinged on families by economic crises.

### **Food, social reproduction and the changing face of rural spaces**

Contemporary discourses frequently allude to the virtues and ethos of agrarian communities. However, for many people, living in rural areas is far from romantic. Rural environments experienced transformations in the last decades, challenging discourses that

refer to them as monolithic, idealized and static (Cloke *et al.* 2006). Some areas are successful in exploiting local food resources. Yet, the industrial production of fresh foods is often driven by translocal fluxes of technologies, foods and people, often carrying significant social and environmental burdens onto rural foodscapes and communities (Jackson *et al.* 2019, Truninger & Freire 2014, Truninger & Horta 2017). Furthermore, rural territories in expanding metropolitan areas often experience urbanization and gentrification processes, even when maintaining some rural characteristics, like landscape or lower population density.

Rural territories underwent major changes since the second half of the 20th century; and in Portugal since the beginning of the democratic regime with the Carnation Revolution of 1974 (as we explain later on). However, issues of poverty and deprivation in rural communities are often undervalued or misrepresented because institutional actors construct them as features of the urban (Cloke *et al.* 1995, Shucksmith & Chapman 2002, Woodward 1996). In Portugal, as in other European Countries, even the statistical breakdown of data is insufficient for a precise assessment of poverty rates in rural settings. And a failure to acknowledge that inequalities and deprivation pervade rural spaces inevitably affects access to food.

Previous research unpacked idealised notions of what life and food are like for those living in the countryside. Growing up in the countryside has been shown to have a “dark side” of lack of support, exclusion and isolation which dislodges notions of the rural as a place of harmony and inclusiveness (Matthews *et al.* 2000). Feminist research shows that social reproduction and provision of care, of which foodwork is a quintessential part, are highly gendered endeavours, whose weight disproportionally lays on women (Cairns & Johnston 2015). The very notion of the rural idyll is associated with traditional gender roles, shaping expectations about motherhood, labour market participation, dedication to

family and community life (Little & Austin 1996). Research in contexts affected by austerity policies shows that the retraction of public expenditure and lack of investment in infrastructure more often affects women, making these policies an instrument of a gendered ideology (Hall 2019). Nascent literature explores the variegated geographies of rural food poverty and food aid support in the UK (i.e. food banks) (May *et al.* 2020). However, the role and gendered nature of informal networks of support in alleviating rural food poverty is yet to be addressed.

In the next section, we turn to representations and experiences of rurality in Portugal. We draw on historical accounts and empirical assessments from the literature on welfare and social networks and establish comparisons with other international contexts.

### **Representations and experiences of rurality in Portugal: welfare, communitarianism and networks**

Unlike England, where "the rural idyll" attains a near hegemony (Halfacree 1995, Shucksmith 2018), representations of the rural in Portugal are heterogeneous. Soares da Silva *et al.* (2016) identified five clusters of lay representations (Idealistic, Confident, Defeatists, Nature Lovers, Anti-Idyllic). Simultaneously representing the rural as idyllic and deprived is not contradictory. Signs of 'pre-modernity' are a prerequisite for a place to be valued as idyllic. And urban populations frequently hold 'pastoralist' perspectives prizing tradition and natural resources (Figueiredo 2013).

The diversity in representations in Portugal is not explained by sociodemographic factors (Soares da Silva *et al.* 2016) and is likely pinned on recent history. On the one hand, the ruralist ideology of the *Estado Novo*<sup>2</sup> had long-lasting effects, especially among older generations (Mansinho & Schmidt 1997). On the other hand, rural areas are diverse, and a considerable part of urban populations maintain persistent *liaisons* with rural territories

(Oliveira Baptista 2006). Finally, in recent decades, the political neglect endured by some rural areas led to an image of abandonment (Figueiredo 2013).

In what concerns models of welfare provision and social attitudes, Portugal is usually depicted as familialistic, like other Southern Europe countries. The roots of familialism are related to social and historical developments. On the one hand, late and slow processes of urbanisation and industrialisation. On the other hand, the crippling effect of almost five decades of right-wing dictatorship (1926-1974). The regime's ideology was markedly authoritarian, anti-liberal and anti-democratic, with institutions upholding ideals of an agrarian and Catholic society, under the motto of *God, Fatherland and Family* (Rosas 2001). However, the long-lasting influence of the Catholic Church precedes the regime. According to Cabral (2006), the features of familialism developed as an effect of distance to power. Throughout the XIX and XX centuries, low literacy and administrative despotism of the State, whose action enmeshed authoritarianism and lack of intervention, shaped a lack of confidence and low participation of the peasantry (and the working classes) in representative institutions (Adão e Silva 2002).

Convergence with the European social model and an increase of literacy rates following the Democratic Revolution of 1974 did not abruptly change these circumstances. Even with the establishment of a universalistic Welfare State, family resources remained crucial for familial welfare (Adão e Silva 2002, Cabral 2006, Portugal 2011). The Welfare State and gift-exchange systems perform non-interchangeable functions, satisfy unique needs and operate under different principles. While the former is pinned on the principles of justice, dignity, equality, and redistribution, the latter relies on free adhesion and generosity towards others based on affinities or shared bonds (Portugal 2004).

Researchers agree that social networks play an important role in the provision of support and welfare for families in Portugal (Aboim *et al.* 2013, Portugal 2014, Wall *et al.* 2001).

Portugal (2014) claims that a strong welfare society compensates for the shortfalls of public provision. Such claim is contradicted by Wall and colleagues (Aboim, et al., 2013; Wall, et al., 2001). These latter authors concluded that support provided by informal networks is not far-reaching. Moreover, “far from compensating for social differentiation between families, welfare provision stemming from personal relationships reproduces social inequalities” (Aboim, et al., 2013, p. 65).

Networks are predominantly composed of family members, even when non-kin are incorporated (Gouveia & Widmer 2014). Family relations are associated with trustfulness, durability, thus justifying a high level of reliance (Almeida 2003). Conversely, other ties are associated with (the possibility of) disappointment (Portugal 2014). The strength of family ties is also evidenced by the possibility of extending its cloak to non-kin (treating someone as “family” is possible and common) (Wall & Gouveia 2014). Social homophily is stronger for non-kin ties and increases among highly qualified strata of the population (Portugal 2014).

Networks are vertically gendered, with couples more often interacting and mobilising resources from the wife’s genealogical side (Wall, et al., 2001). Reliance on the maternal side in family interactions beyond the household is a strategic effort to maximise protection in contexts where individuals lack the means to meet prevailing cultural norms and values (Cabral 1986). The division of labour and care is gendered, with women being the primary providers of care and services and men more often providing financial and patrimonial support. So far, research has not identified differences between support networks in urban versus rural settings. This absence may also stem from the ideological strength of the concept of rural idyll and from the (high) expectations placed on community, kinship and land ownership in rural communities, especially in what concerns access to food resources.



According to data from the EU Survey on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC), in 2017, 18.3% of Portuguese families were at risk of poverty after social transfers. This is the 7<sup>th</sup> highest figure in the EU28, slightly above the average (16.9%), but slightly below other southern European countries (Greece: 20.0%; Italy: 20.3%; Spain: 21.6%) and post-socialist countries (Lithuania: 22.9%; Bulgaria: 23.4%; Romania: 23.6%). As aforementioned, the geographical breakdown of data is far from perfect: data on poverty rates are only available by level of urbanisation at the national level. Data from the same year shows that, across Portugal, poverty is highest in sparsely populated areas (with 24.0% of the population at-risk-of-poverty against 15.1% in moderately populated areas and 17.8% in densely populated areas). These figures, while lower than in Spain (25.9%), Greece (25.3%) and many Eastern European countries, are well above the EU28 average of 19.8%.

In Portugal, the threshold of income poverty in 2017 (60% of median income) was € 5.442/year (€454/month). Overall, social transfers, related to illness and disability, family, unemployment and social inclusion only contributed 5.3% to the reduction of the risk of poverty. As in previous years, the highest at-risk-of-poverty rates were estimated for single-parent households (33.1%) and couples with three or more dependent children (41.4%). The risk of poverty for households made up of three or more adults with dependent children was 23.1%. In the same year, the rate of material deprivation of residents in Portugal was 18.0%, with severe material deprivation affecting 6.9% of the population.

Strikingly, while poverty rates in Portugal are among the highest in Europe, only 3.0% of families were unable to afford a meal with meat, chicken, fish or vegetarian equivalent. This figure is lower than the EU28 average (7.9%), and much below countries with similar poverty rates (for example, 13.4% of Italian and 13.2% of Greek households

cannot afford a protein meal every other day). Such is puzzling, considering that according to the Portuguese Household Budget Survey 2015/2016, food expenses are second in terms of importance to family budgets, after housing, corresponding to 13.3% of total expenditure on average, rising to 13.8% in families with dependent children. While these figures suggest that struggling families in Portugal may be able to draw on other sources when accessing food, it is unclear to what extent are networks (and underlying assumptions concerning communitarianism) compensating for the inadequacies and limited range of action of the Welfare State. And little is known about the distribution of food within informal social networks and their gendered patterns. In this paper, we seek to bridge these gaps, drawing on data from a recently completed research project. We will do so by looking at how struggling families access food in a changing rural setting, assessing their dependence on informal networks, and their role in alleviating food poverty.

#### **Research context: a changing rural area in the outskirts of the capital**

The parish council of São João das Lampas and Terrugem<sup>3</sup> is part of the Sintra municipality. It occupies 33.6 square kilometres, roughly 40 kilometres west of Lisbon. In 2011, according to the National Census, the parish council had 16505 inhabitants, scattered through 63 villages and hamlets. Most villages within the parish are small, and only a handful have more than 500 inhabitants. Along the coastline, the parish is partly enclosed within the Sintra-Cascais Natural Park, which was established to preserve the local landscape, fauna and flora, thus imposing limitations to construction and land use. From the late 1950s until the early 2010s the population of the Sintra municipality grew rapidly (from roughly 60 thousand inhabitants to 380 thousand). A conurbation from Sintra to Lisbon developed, along the railway line. Currently, it is the most populated municipality in the Greater Lisbon Area. Vast areas formerly dedicated to farming,

246 grazing and milling explored mostly by small landholder farmers, were transformed into  
247 residential suburbs. Meanwhile, the parishes of São João das Lampas and Terrugem,  
248 which cover almost  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the territory, only doubled in population size (currently  
249 accounting for 4% of the county's population). As the influx of migrants was modest, an  
250 important share of the current population has familial roots and strong social  
251 embeddedness in this area. Unlike the rest of the municipality, the area maintained rural  
252 features, namely in what concerns land use, landscape, seasonal festivals, and traditions.  
253 Owing to its location, the area is increasingly a suburb of Lisbon, attracting new dwellers  
254 and many visitors to their beaches. Currently, there is a discount supermarket in one of  
255 the main villages in the parish and another small supermarket in another. Some smaller  
256 villages have grocery stores and bakeries. A farmer's market takes place in the two main  
257 villages on alternate weekends and there are street food stalls on weekdays. Larger chain  
258 supermarkets exist close to the county seat and in most densely populated areas.  
259 During the 1960s, part of the current parish council was studied by the anthropologist  
260 Joyce Riegelhaupt (1964). Remnants of peasant societies resisted in the Iberian Peninsula,  
261 making it appealing for ethnographers. Features of peasant societies were preserved and  
262 even promoted in Portugal. In this context, Riegelhaupt examined how proximity to an  
263 increasingly dynamic urban centre influenced the integration of a small peasant  
264 community into society in general. The area was transitioning from a traditional pattern  
265 of subsistence agriculture to wage labour, available mostly outside the parish.  
266 Riegelhaupt concluded that the penetration of formal economic, political and social  
267 institutions into peasant communities occurred through modern means of communication  
268 and cultural dissemination. The community was beginning to lose its autonomy and  
269 identity. However, owing to a structure of land ownership where most families were  
270 smallholders, balanced reciprocity, a system in which items or gifts are returned without

delay, prevailed as the dominant mode of interpersonal relationships within the community. Since then, the country witnessed an extensive change, becoming increasingly integrated into a sprawling metropolitan area. It is hard to say to what extent these results remain up to date, as there was no further research. However, the expansion of the formal economy likely led to the erosion of these mechanisms.

## **Methods and Materials**

The data used in this paper stems from the *Families and Food in Hard Times* project (FFHT), which analysed the implications of food poverty among families with children in three European countries (United Kingdom, Portugal and Norway). The study combined conventional semi-structured interviews, photo-elicitation interviews, and observation. A case-study approach is suited to understand the embeddedness of food poverty in family life (Schwandt & Gates 2018). For this study, we resort to the subsample of participants from our intermediate area aforementioned.

### ***Sampling, recruitment and ethical considerations***

We chose schools as a sampling point because the FFHT project sought to understand food poverty in families with school-age children. Public school enlists the overwhelming majority of children, as there are no private schools in the parish. We preferred schools to institutions or NGOs as we sought to find cases with different intensities of food poverty, not necessarily those that resort to these alternatives. We selected families from a pool of replies to a screener survey distributed to parents/carers of all children aged 11 to 15 in the public-school district of the parish. We only contacted families that expressed a willingness to participate. All families and individuals are anonymised. Pseudonyms were employed to protect participants' identities.

Our intentional choice of fifteen cases aimed at diversity in terms of family structure (single parent, couples or extended families), and employment status (full-time employed,

part-time employed, unemployed). Most interviews took place in the house of families, with a handful taking place at the school or in public places (cafés and even a bus-stop). Each of the fifteen case-studies includes two interviews with a parent and a child (for a total of 30 interviews). In first interviews, we used semi-structured interview schedules. They covered issues such as current family circumstances and living arrangements; life history; eating patterns and food preparation at home and school; household division of work and child participation; food shopping; income and outgoings; food and wellbeing; and representations and expectations concerning the future. Four families were invited for follow-up interviews. These visits took place six months after and included a follow-up interview, a kitchen-tour with adults and a photo-elicitation interview with children, whom we had asked to take pictures of their daily food practices. We used kitchen tours to assess issues of space, food management and storage, availability and condition of appliances. Fieldwork took place from the Autumn of 2016 to the Summer of 2017. Data analysis followed a case-study approach, including all materials (first and second interviews, photos, notes and observations). We organized a case summary of each family, following a thematic structure covering the relevant issues. For this paper, we analysed the empirical materials taking into consideration the mobilisation of informal support by selected families (availability of resources within informal/personal networks and type of support received), drawing mostly from interviews with parents.

### **Experiences of being food poor in a changing rural context**

Within the sample, there were rich and diverse personal stories. They ranged from long-life experiences of poverty and deprivation to cases of families whose struggle was recent, a consequence of unemployment, low-income or life course transitions (namely divorce/separation). The sample includes five single-parent families, nine nuclear families (two of them stepfamilies) and one extended family. There was a variety of

employment statuses, with ten families with parents in gainful employment, three families with one unemployed parent and one employed/retired parent, and two single-parent families with an unemployed parent.

Although there is no consensual definition, food poverty is often described as the inability to acquire or consume an adequate quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so (Dowler & O'Connor 2012, Dowler *et al.* 2001, p.12). Therefore, food poverty concerns the quantity and quality of food, the dietary choices and cultural preferences of eaters, the physical and financial resources of individuals and families, and the impact of diets on health status. It is a form of exclusion and a potential outcome of income poverty. Research highlights that the external causes of food poverty affect the lived experience of individuals, potentially impacting their livelihood across several dimensions.

Within the scope of the FFHT project, we identified six core dimensions of food poverty. (Table 1).

[Table 1 about here]

### *Case studies*

Following the main objectives of this paper, we selected emblematic case-examples with different family and employment circumstances, which render features found throughout the larger sample concerning the dimensions of food poverty and the availability (and mobilization) of informal support. Table 2 depicts household composition and key sociodemographic indicators.

[Table 2 about here]

## **The Reis: “We’re folks that never ask for anything”**

### *Family history and current circumstances*

The Reis family has lived in this parish for many generations. They inhabit an old-style rural house, contiguous to the maternal grandmother’s house. Both homes share a courtyard and outdoor amenities (stove, washbasin, water deposit, herb vases).

The current family income is roughly €700, including the father’s salary as a mason for the city council plus child benefits. Rosa (the mother) is unemployed, having lost her job in a quarry over ten years ago. Unable to get a stable job due to a lack of formal qualifications and short-sightedness, she has been working as a farmhand in land plots belonging to a neighbour. For her work, she receives no salary, only a percentage of sharecrops. The eldest son finished secondary school and is convalescing from an accident. The younger son is in 7<sup>th</sup> grade of secondary school.

The living standards of the Reis’s fell sharply after Rosa lost her job, and worsened during the economic crisis, because of extra income levies. Eventually, cuts were rolled back, but the abolition of Christmas and summer holidays bonuses in civil servants’ wages and redistribution into twelve salaries had an impact. Currently, they have no emergency fund for an emergency.

### *Quantity, quality and food procurement*

The Reis family spends most of their €200 monthly food budget on a visit to the main town about 20 kilometres away. They prefer going to larger discount supermarkets and buy value brands because items in the local shop are pricey. Bread and the odd missing ingredient are the only goods they get locally. Getting to the main town is not easy, as the only form of transportation they have is an old battered motorcycle with a trailer. Transporting monthly shopping on the bus is not viable.

Rosa says she gets plenty of quality fresh vegetables, poultry and eggs from a small plot they have, and from the farm where she works. As for the visits to the supermarket, they mostly get foods that they do not produce like fruit, meat, fish and packaged goods (cereal, tins, milk, among others). They plan visits to take advantage of promotions, buying whatever is cheaper to store in a chest freezer. Rosa says “(w)e always buy the cheapest, but only when we need. For example, if horse mackerel is cheap and we have it at home we don’t buy it just because it is cheap...but we always try to find the cheapest, so the money lasts longer”.

Ultimately, the Reis’s food budget is insufficient to ensure enough food, especially in terms of proteins (meat and fish). Rosa says “(p)otatoes, rice, pasta, vegetables, that we can get. It is the meat that...for example, one should eat 100gr each. A lot of times that is not what happens... sometimes it is half of that, half...”. Only once did Rosa request support from the closest food bank. Initially, she received a parcel with staples but later was deemed ineligible because they do not have a rent or utility payment in their name.

#### *Social participation around food*

In the Reis family, all sociability around food occurs within the extended family, usually around the grandmother’s table. It has been a long time since they had someone over or went out to eat. They cannot afford it even on birthdays or other special occasions. Outside, at most, they will go out for a coffee at the village cafe. In the vicinity, there are no fast-food options, and the few restaurants that exist are all too expensive for the Reis’s. Rosa says, “I would like to go more often (...) but I can’t and so have to stop liking it”.

#### *Constraint and worrying about food*

During our interactions, Rosa reflected on the challenges of feeding a family with a meagre income: self-consumption means anticipating, buying in bulk, adapting to the seasonality and unpredictability of crops yields, eating what is accessible at the time and,



occasionally, reducing food intake due to a crop that failed that year. Constraints are more noticeable when school restarts. Even with some support from the city council in obtaining schoolbooks, there is always a need for additional supplies. Moreover, she would like to get new clothes for her youngest son and stop relying on recycled ones from his brother.

Rosa got quite emotional when talking about the constant struggle of feeding the family. During our interactions, it became evident that Rosa was deeply affected by the social exclusion and the many deprivations felt by her family. The constant worry about not having enough money to put food on the table, paying up bills and other expenses, distressed her and led to feelings of deep sadness, “It messes me up... my nerves... makes me sad... it makes me want to disappear. Pack my bags and just disappear from this life of poverty....”.

#### *Support*

Rosa’s mother is the immediate and almost sole source of informal support. Her only income is a survival pension, and so she cannot afford to contribute with money. She mostly helps in looking after the youngest son and trading a few food items. More importantly, the family dwells on an extension of her house, which means that they do not spend anything on housing. Yet, as there is only patrimonial register (under Rosa’s mother), there are consequences when applying for support from the food bank, as mentioned above. Sporadically, Rosa’s husband friends and colleagues provide additional support, mostly gifts for the children (clothing and shoes). As for other family members or neighbours, Rosa claimed that they were folks that never asked for anything. Rosa was planning to request help from the social services of her husband’s employer (city council) but was pessimistic about the outcome.

***The Ega Family*** – “Some months I think, will I have a piece of meat, some fish?”

420 *Family history and current circumstances*

421 The Ega family lives in a rented flat on an old country house, in one of the largest villages  
 422 of the parish council. Beatriz (the mother) grew up in poverty in a suburb of Lisbon. She  
 423 did not finish secondary school and started working still in her early teens. Beatriz moved  
 424 in about ten years ago, with a teenage girl, a young boy and a partner from the parish.  
 425 When they broke up, she decided to stay. She had a daughter from a short-lived  
 426 relationship. Beatriz is a lone mother of two after her older daughter moved out.  
 427 Beatriz is currently unemployed. Health problems make it difficult for Beatriz to maintain  
 428 a job. With a history of back pain, she awaits a vacancy to undergo surgery in the public  
 429 health service. Unable to afford private childcare, she cannot apply for any fulltime job.  
 430 There is no State or municipal childcare centre in town and no transportation for pre-  
 431 school infants in other villages. Meanwhile, physically demanding occupations, like  
 432 elderly care, kitchen help or laundry services are the only part-time positions on offer  
 433 nearby.  
 434 Monthly income is around €460 per month, about €260 from the Social Insertion Income,  
 435 €80 from Child Allowance and €120 alimony from her young daughter's father. The son's  
 436 father refused to pay alimony, and the court ruled that he would contribute with clothing  
 437 and food items. Every week he delivers a bag with pork chops, mackerel and codfish. The  
 438 monthly fee for the flat is €350, and other maintenance expenses exceed her monthly  
 439 income. Some friends chip in with money to pay for TV and internet. Beatriz has debt in  
 440 arrears, going back to when she was with her former partner.

441 *Quantity, quality and food procurement*

442 There are a few minimarkets within walking distance of Beatriz's place. Quality food  
 443 items at reasonable prices are difficult to find. She only uses local stores for small  
 444 purchases (bread, cheese or ham). The bus fare to the supermarket in the main town is

expensive. Beatriz does most of the shopping online, spending between €80 and €100 on food every month. Such an amount is insufficient to obtain variety in fruits and proteins, especially fish, something that worries her. She supplements this with a monthly visit to the food bank, where she stocks up on staples (canned goods, flour, cereal, olive oil). Beatriz also struggles with the lack of fresh vegetables, fruits and dairy.

#### *Social participation around food*

There is a handful of coffee shops and restaurants in town, but no cheap fast-food options. Beyond the very occasional takeout rotisserie chicken or pizza, Beatriz hardly goes to any of these places. She last went four months ago, upon invitation from the owner for whom she once worked. Beatriz questions the quality of food in these establishments and warrants that “It makes no difference to me. (...) I’m one of those people who’d rather eat what’s mine because eating out I never know what’s in it. Although I worked there, (...), I won’t give half my money, nor five cents to that place... I’d rather cook myself and perhaps sit down at the table down there and eat outside than in a restaurant ...”.

Social occasions with family or friends at home involving food are few and far between, usually only for drinks or snacks. Beatriz avoids having children’s schoolmates over because she can’t offer much. The only regulars are her daughter and partner. Unable to prepare anything “fancy” for these occasions, Beatriz fixes up a larger dosage of the usual fare. Occasionally, she reciprocates, but getting to her daughter is not easy, as public transportation is infrequent and expensive.

#### *Constraint and worrying about food*

Beatriz is concerned with the lack of quantity, quality and diversity of their food, claiming that “we often lack something”. Currently, balancing food and housing is impossible: it is either one or the other, and in-between “many things fell apart”. Having to choose, she prioritizes food and “that’s why I’m two months behind, even despite going to the food

bank often (...)”. In the past, struggling to feed her children, unable to get a decent job in town, and about to be homeless, Beatriz fell into severe depression and attempted suicide.

#### *Support*

Over the years, Beatriz became estranged from her family. To be sure, they live relatively far away, but she ascertains they would have little means to help. A lack of social embeddedness in the village means that her current informal support network is minimal. Former partners were locally connected and had access to farmland and produce. Most of these ties were cut when the relationships ended.

Even getting to the food bank is tricky, given that she does not have a car and there is no direct bus route. A friend drives her there. Other neighbours offer occasional relief, such as donations of staples for the Christmas Eve traditional meal (dried cod, potatoes, cabbage, onions and carrots).

Highly dependent on formal support, Beatriz interactions with institutions are strained and often traumatic. Some years back, on the brink of eviction, Beatriz applied for social housing, something that would mean relocating to the urban area, as there is none in the parish. “(...) (T)he answer they gave me was I only had two choices: either get a rich husband or go to work (...) [This was] in front of a teacher. This teacher, since she’s a little crazy, punched the table twice and said: ‘you can only be joking!’”. The school staff mobilized to help the family, mediated with Social Security services, ran a petition, appealed for food donations through the parent’s association, and ended up paying Beatriz’s rent for a few months. Meanwhile, she still awaits to access social housing.

When we last spoke, she was again on the brink of eviction.

#### **The Lagos family – “It has been a long time since I had that life (going out)”.**

##### *Family history and current circumstances*

The Lagos couple has three children and shares the household with Luisa ageing and sickly mother. They live in a small hamlet of the parish, in the same modest country house

where Luisa (the mother) was born. The building looks unfinished, combining old and modern elements. They remortgaged the house as a guarantee to cover a loan they took for renovations.

Luisa is an attendant at an itinerant bakery, working at different fairs and markets throughout the week and weekend. Her husband installs electric and electronic equipment. He has no formal contract, and the work is undeclared. Both parents have only attended primary school and started working very young. Currently, they work long hours, Luisa starting very early in the morning, and her husband often working overtime. Their monthly income is roughly €1600, including Luisa's and her husband's salaries, her mother's pension and child allowance for the three children. Fixed expenses take a large chunk of their income, with mortgage costing over €400, travel amounting to about €200 in petrol, amenities (water, gas, electricity, phone) over €150, and an undisclosed amount in healthcare and pharmacy expenses (Luisa's mother is receiving cancer treatment as an outpatient). They have no cable, internet or landline phone.

#### *Quantity, quality and food procurement*

Luisa manages her food purchasing daily and struggled to make an accurate estimation of how much she spends in total (based on average spending and purchase frequency we estimate that she spends around €440 per month). According to Luisa, it is hard to get quality food items at a reasonable price locally. There is not much on offer in the two local stores, and fresh produce, meat and fish prices are steep. When she is short on money, she foregoes fruit and prefers to take fish or meat. Luisa mentions that over the years, they have been eating less and less fresh fish, something that she finds reason for concern. Luisa claims that bigger supermarkets have more variety and more affordable prices. However, she also mentions that getting there is not easy, as they are a bit far off and reconciling schedules with her husband is not always easy (Luisa does not drive).

521 *Social participation around food*

522 The Lagos family never have anyone over for a meal, drinks or coffee, neither do their  
 523 children's friends come for study, play and a snack. All social occasions, including  
 524 children's birthdays, Christmases and other holidays, are restricted to members of the  
 525 household. Even for work, Luisa and her husband always take a lunch box. In town, there  
 526 is only a small coffee shop that serves affordable meals, but Luisa says that "we cannot  
 527 all go". Luisa says that "It has been a long time since I had that life (going out)", much  
 528 less going to restaurants in "(villages) where foods (sic) are very expensive". So much  
 529 time has passed, that Luisa claims that "it makes no difference to me not going out to eat  
 530 (..) as long as I have food at home, for me that is enough".

531 *Constraint and worrying about food*

532 For Luisa, although feeding the children is vital, paying the loan needs to come first, as  
 533 not to risk losing the house. Often Luisa has no money for the instalments, meaning that  
 534 she either delays paying, risking penalties, or asks for advancement in her wages. Usually,  
 535 managing food gets a little more difficult around the middle of every month, a time when  
 536 she starts relying on the only local minimarket where they let her run a tab. Even though  
 537 more expensive and farther away from home (about 1.5 kilometres), Luisa prefers going  
 538 there for this reason. As soon as she gets paid, she settles her tab. Always worrying about  
 539 running out of food for her children, Luisa sometimes skips meals or goes by with only a  
 540 sandwich. Weekends and vacations are worse because she has to worry about having food  
 541 for more meals, as children have access to free school meals. An additional worry is  
 542 keeping some money to help out her mother, as not all of the health expenses are covered  
 543 by the public provision (home nursing and dressings have to be paid).

544 *Support*

In the case of immediate family, there is no one beyond her mother, and Luisa is the one providing support. Although a few relatives are living in the same village, none of them offers material support or support in kind to Luísa and her family. Over ten years ago, when Luisa was temporarily unemployed, a friendly neighbour brought them parcels from a food bank. She moved out, and they lost touch. Luisa never applied for help from the food bank. She does not know how to request for emergency help from the city council or local Social Security branch. Moreover, these services operate from the county seat and working hours make them hard to access. As mentioned, Luisa often asks for help from her bosses, in the form of wage advance. They also loaned a fridge when hers broke down, and they had no money to repair it or buy a new one. Contrasting her lack of support with colleagues and acquaintances, Luisa says: “I can't get any aid and colleagues of mine (...) are entitled to so much, even with a much better standard of living. But there, either I don't know or don't know how to move. I don't know!”

## Conclusions

In this paper, we looked at experiences of food poverty in an intermediate area – a changing rural context within the metropolitan area of Lisbon, Portugal. Questioning the premises of the “rural idyll”, we explored how struggling families living in this area experience food poverty. Additionally, we were interested in examining to what extent are they able to draw from informal support networks. Our case-study approach does not aim at generalization. However, an in-depth analysis of specific circumstances delivers strong, yet nuanced portrayals, of how food poverty is experienced. It also illuminates the types, flows and gendered patterns of informal support available to families in this changing rural setting.

We looked at cases using the framework of a tentative definition of food poverty (Dowler *et al.* 2001, O'Connor *et al.* 2016). The cases show that low-income families in this

context struggle to achieve satisfactory quantity and quality of food. The area can hardly be defined as a food desert, but store density is definitively lower than in urban areas. Local shops tend to be upmarket and have less variety of items. Even when less expensive options are available (buying from door-to-door vendors or sourcing from producers), these are hardly enough to cater to the everyday needs of contemporary families. When possible, these families prefer sourcing food from supermarkets affiliated with major retail chains, located near large towns or suburban areas, where they can get low-cost products, often storing up for the future, as in other rural areas (for example Truchero 2017). The Reis family usage of a chest freezer is reminiscent of the strategies used within peasant societies to handle excess meat after the slaughtering of pigs or other animals: large portions of meat are bought, stocked and consumed parsimoniously throughout the year. Buying in town seems to be an option when there is no other choice. It also may be the case, as in the Lagos family, that such is the only way of accessing easy credit, based on trust and mutual knowledge. While the Ega family makes strategic use of online shopping that is hardly a solution to access fresh produce regularly. Finally, “alternative” food procurement strategies, such as resorting to food charities, may not be as readily available for families living in the countryside and, when they exist, using them may have a reputational cost.

The cases show that exclusion from social participation around food is a defining feature of being food poor in rural areas. As with stores, there are no affordable options: fast-food restaurants and other affordable outlets are located in densely populated urban settings. On the other hand, these families struggle to offer meaningful reciprocity. Their lack of social participation around food contrasts with contemporary consumption patterns in Portugal, where eating out or having coffee at a local spot is a social norm<sup>4</sup>. Lack of resources and tight food budgets precludes them from offering hospitality to



595 friends and family. Consequently, sociability beyond work and school is restricted to  
596 home and members of the household. While this is not exclusive to rural areas, here it  
597 bears significant consequences in terms of (self-perceived) citizenship and social  
598 participation (O'Connell *et al.* 2019).

599 Concerning informal networks, there are two important and interconnected takeaways  
600 from our analysis: their unevenness; and their highly gendered nature. The cases show  
601 that access and availability of support are not a given for families living in this changing  
602 rural area. The embeddedness of individuals and families within the community plays a  
603 role in the availability of support. However, amounts and types of support are highly  
604 dependent on the structure (and volume) of capital accrued by close family members.  
605 While relatives with limited economic resources may not be able to provide money or  
606 food, they may share assets, for example, when they are homeowners. These gifts are  
607 critical for some families, like in the case of the Reis family. Embeddedness may also  
608 warrant credit among local circuits beyond their familial relationships, as in the Lagos  
609 family. Conversely, access to these networks may be limited by life-course events.  
610 Networks might also be unavailable to more recent dwellers, less connected within the  
611 community. Therefore, the extent to which informal networks can lessen the effects of  
612 food poverty seems quite limited, skewed, and likely to reinforce inequalities (Aboim *et*  
613 *al.* 2013).

614 On the other hand, informal support networks are simultaneously female-based and seem  
615 often more relevant to women enduring food poverty. While this analysis draws from  
616 three cases, all participants from this rural were women enduring poverty. It is well-  
617 known that feeding the family is an arduous, often invisible, work mostly performed by  
618 women (Cairns & Johnston 2015). Such work continues to be central to the every  
619 (re)production of family life and female identities. Food poor women, burdened with the

task of balancing short family budgets, are in a constant struggle to make ends meet. Moreover, they often depend on other struggling women. The stress and constant worry about food and other expenses take a toll, often leading to despair and feelings of helplessness. Dealings with authorities can be tense and frustrating. However, our effort only pushes the door open to the gendered nature of food poverty and informal support networks. Further research is needed to assess the long-term impact of food poverty on families. On one hand, taking stock of the official statistical data, in more deprived and isolated rural regions such difficulties may be more severe. On the other hand, in such areas, small-scale farming supplemented by off-farming activity can be an escape route out of food poverty. Therefore, future research should focus on food poverty in the uneven and asymmetric territorial geometries, at both national and European levels, also to inform and tailor policy interventions.

Experiences of food poverty in changing rural settings are paradoxical, with families struggling to access food while living in the vicinity of a few food production sites. One explanation for such puzzling finding is that these areas seem to be under the predatory effects of large cosmopolitan cities (such as Lisbon), that empties out former thriving agricultural areas and cracks open spaces for social exclusion and food poverty. In contrast to narratives of the rural as an idyllic space, the case studies form a counter-narrative of inequality, poverty and social exclusion. While no narrative can offer the "whole story," it is vital to contrast expectations with lived experiences. We believe that our approach may be useful in reframing what does it mean to be food poor in a contemporary changing rural setting and to dispel romanticized views of self-sufficiency and communal living.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> We follow the rural-urban typology employed by the European Union since the middle of the 2000, which includes a three-step classification: *Predominantly Rural Areas*; *Intermediate Areas* and *Predominantly Urban Areas*. *Predominantly urban regions* are considered NUTS level 3 regions where more than 80 % of the population live in urban clusters; *Intermediate regions* are NUTS level 3 regions where more than 50 % and up to 80 % of the population live in urban clusters; and *Predominantly rural regions* are NUTS level 3 regions where at least 50 % of the population live in rural grid cells (see also (Döner *et al.* 2020)).

<sup>2</sup> Portugal was under the Estado Novo dictatorship from 1926 to 1974. The regime was inspired by corporatist/fascistic views, and its ideology was markedly authoritarian, anti-liberal and anti-democratic. Institutions upheld ideals of an agrarian and Catholic society, under the motto of God, Fatherland and Family (Rosas 2001).

<sup>3</sup> This territorial unit results from the administrative reorganization of 2013, which merged the former parishes of São João das Lampas and Terrugem.

<sup>4</sup> Eating out is common in Portugal, according to data from market research companies. Nielsen's Global Out-of-home dining survey ranks Portugal among the countries where people more often have meals at restaurants. According to the TGI survey from Marktest (2016), 49.8% of Portuguese individuals over 15 years of age reported eating out in the reference week, the highest of the previous five years. Eating out at lunch or dinner are most common.

Accepted

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